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A RETURN TO THE DAKOTA LAKE REGION

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

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ON days when there was a strong east wind, a good many birds collected at the east side of the lake for the shelter of the wide band of tules and the tree-bordered bank above. On one such morning I was delighted to find a large motherly Canvasback with nine nearly grown young among the number. The straight Grecian nose line was enough to identify the family on sight, while the mother's head was light compared with the reddish heads of the young, her throat being almost white in contrast to the cinnamon of her body. A small blue-billed Ruddy Duck got in among her brood when they were swimming about one of his feeding grounds, and she promptly swam at him, chasing him until he dived ignominiously; proud little Ruddy, who had driven a Pied-bill off these very premises not long before! The mother Canvasback dived easily, but the young made hard work of it, giving a porpoise-like hop as they went down, showing their white under tail coverts as they disappeared. By a quarter past eight the young Canvasbacks were sitting with their heads on their backs resting, early though it was; while their mother sat with her head up looking at me.

Another morning I was greatly pleased to discover a small mother Ruddy swimming along the tules with eleven newly-hatched little ones, leaving a wake of bubbles behind them when they swam fast. While I was watching the population of the eastern shore, flocks of Ducks, with whistling wings would pass over my head, the Blue-winged Teal with their free, tilting flight, in the mornings coming in from their roosting lakes, in the afternoons passing out to them.

One morning in the middle of August it was so hot that there was very little going on. The lake was a mirror spotted with resting water fowl, its tule islands softly hazy, hazily reflected in the lake, white spots here and there marking the heads of Ruddy Ducks. Little was heard but the occasional call of a Pied-bill or other Grebe.

An interesting figure often seen wandering around by itself on the east side of the lake, was a little Horned Grebe, with light cheeks and a reddish brown throat, either a brooding bird taking her daily outing, or her mate trying to pass his time during her absence. And one red letter day, August 15, out beyond the wide tule band I saw four species of Grebe at once—the light-headed Horned, the chunked little Pied-bill, a Holboell with its long reddish brown neck, who gave a *kruk* of warning, and at last a partly grown family of the white-throated Western Grebe that I had been looking for ever since I came to the lake; their low distant calls having teased my ears with memories of the beautiful flock on Devil's Lake. The length of the neck was what struck me first, and then the whole white front. A soft *ker'r'r'r'-ree* again recalled the flock and made clear the difference between the cry of the Western and the Holboell. The next day I found one of the Western again in the same place, diving and apparently rising only far enough to put up its bill for air. Finally it flew, away across the lake, showing its white wing patches and its feet held out behind as it disappeared, its low quavering call resounding over the water. After that I scanned the lake eagerly for the silvery throats, but the large

white spots in the tules across the lake all proved to be Herons, the small white spots at the foot of the tules, Ruddies, and those out on the lake, Gulls.

Occasionally during the summer I had caught glimpses of the Eared Grebe on the east side of the lake, so completing the number of those that breed in the northern United States. And on September 2, when, having returned to the farm on north Sweetwater, I drove back with our little school boy to see what was there, I discovered to my great delight, a mother Eared Grebe with the pointed crest and dark fall plumage, diving and feeding a half grown young one with a black crown and white throat and breast. Between feedings the little fellow helped himself a bit, putting his head adeptly under water. While I counted the number of times the active mother dived in a minute the school boy held the watch to time her. Six, seven, and six, the record ran, in the three minutes before the pair were hidden by the tules. It was a pretty picture of maternal devotion, the old mother, gentlest and most attractive of all the Grebes, working so tirelessly to care for her little one. The charm of the picture appealed to the child by my side, with a new little brother at home, and as we turned away he asked gently, "Isn't it dear?" When shown the willow gateway and the platform where the nestling Coot had been, he entered right into the spirit of that, too, as we walked away, saying softly, "That's a nice little place."

The morning when the four species of Grebes were disporting themselves outside the tules, hundreds of Ducks passed over from the east about half past nine, an enormous flock of Blue-winged Teal whistling low over my head with their tilting swerving flight, passing on to their feeding grounds at the back of the lake. The Ducks usually began coming earlier in the morning, and when the fields around their open eastern lakes were being harvested, apparently fled before the harvesters.

As far as I could determine, the Ruddies were not among those who shifted to the open lakes for the night. The largest part of the Ruddy population of the lake, when wind and weather were favorable, were to be found in a quiet cove at the southwestern corner, protected by a border of thick woods and willows and a wide band of tule. On two days when the cove was empty, it was swept by the wind. My first visit was on a quiet day and with the glass I counted between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and thirty Ruddies among the brown spots in the cove, enumerating only those in which I could actually make out either the white cheek patches, the ruddy backs, or the spike tails. Another day—August 8—there were still more. There seemed to be a good many females among them and there may have been more than I noted, for at a distance, unless the spike tails are seen, it is very hard to distinguish these obscure little Ducks. But in my count, the males seemed largely in the majority. Of thirty-nine counted on August 9, twenty-five were adult males, and on August 15, thirty-two males were counted and no females distinguished.

From the cove it was an easy swim for the little Ruddies across to the north-west shore. Here there were jungles of cane, six to eight feet high, topped with heavy pinkish brown brooms, down whose lanes young families were seen swimming, and patches of high tule leading out with protecting cover to the main tule islands near the middle of the lake where busy waterfowl were always to be seen. White spots at the base of stands of tule from shore to islands attested the popularity of the safe harbor with the Ruddies. Coots and a variety of Ducks were also found here, swimming about with their small families. A Coot who caught sight of me as one of her red-heads started to

cross a waterway made it turn back abruptly by her terrified, peremptory *tub-up*; and by her hysterical outbursts made a Marsh Hawk change his mind several times when starting to light on the tules.

This northwestern secluded part of the lake, farthest from even occasional passersby, was that in which Tule Wrens sang, and into which the flocks of Ducks that came over in the early mornings first settled down, and were seen bathing, rushing around in the water, or rising and flying across to the Coulee or the long slough in the pasture where they liked to rest. They also gathered here under the tules and the protecting bank above when a high northwest wind had crested the lake with white caps and driven the water fowl to cover; for whichever way the wind blew across the lake, the Ducks were to be found under the bank on the side from which it came, as in this way they escaped the roughness of waves swept by the wind. Large flocks assembled on the long slough in the pasture—three hundred I counted at one time—standing in close rows with bills on their shoulders looking like headless horsemen, or, in view of their brown eclipse plumage assumed after the breeding season, more particularly suggesting rows of mushrooms, brown on top, lighter below. Who and what were they all? After watching the handsomely and distinctively colored males in the early part of the season, it was trying enough to have them mask themselves in this way, and I greeted the diagnostic spoon bill of the Shoveller, the long neck of the Pintail, and the blue wing patches of the Teal with positive gratitude.

Sometimes a great flock would rise and break away, leaving me bewildered if they failed to show the few earmarks I had mastered during the season. Alas for the acquired knowledge of the hunter without his bag! At the lake end of the slough, one morning, seeing only a few Ducks in the marsh grass to detain me, I was hurrying by when, with a roar, a well hidden flock rose before my astonished gaze. Even more pasture land had formerly been given over to the water fowl of the adjoining lake, for, as had been proved by a lengthy law suit, this was meandering land, changing its boundaries with the changing rainfall so that no titles could be given to it by the government.

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While the larger part of the waterfowl of the lake were naturally found along its sheltering marshy borders, some interesting sights were seen off the wooded southern shore. On my first visit to this shore, looking through the trees, I saw an intimate family picture—two of the handsome red-necked Holboell Grebes swimming protectingly around with their two downy young. So I had found the breeding ground of the Holboell at last and should have the opportunity to study it! Three days later, on August 1, I found an adult with two nearly half grown young. While the mother—to settle all matters of sex arbitrarily—bathed and preened, showing her warm ruddy neck and white throat patch, the young showed the white throat—a distinct patch across the water—a pale reddish neck, and the characteristic Grebe breast. While the mother rose and shook the water from her feathers, one of the young indolently lay prone on the water and stretched his foot. The next evening between 6:30 and 6:50 I found the old Grebe giving her young what was probably their last meal for the night. As she held her bill down, a pretty effect was given, the loop made by neck and bill being reflected in the water. Six Holboells were subsequently seen, resting out in front of the tules bordering the lake.

And then came the best of all—the discovery of a family of three half or three quarters grown young whose mother kept them mostly close along the protected wooded border of the lake, where, from the high bank above, guarding my steps that no crackling twigs might alarm them, and screening myself behind tree trunks and low hanging branches, I was able to watch them for ten days, so enjoying one of the pleasantest experiences of the season and seeing many a pretty family picture as they passed their time as they chose at home, unconscious of observers.

The first time I saw them they were followed at a little distance by the light-cheeked, solitary Horned Grebe that I had often seen swimming quietly by itself about the lake. Unobtrusively the Solitary One followed the Happy Family, as if it enjoyed watching their pretty ways. One of the brood kept close to his mother, talking continuously in weak infantile tones, sometimes hinting that he wanted food or a ride, but more often showing that he just wanted his mother—a real mother's baby! Once their two heads were reflected, making a sweet maternal picture. And again the mother raised her head to let the little one pass under her bill. He swam part of the time close to her neck, which gave her a sweet protecting air. When another of the brood swam up beside her, Little Talkative kept right on. In preening herself Mother Holbœll had left a white feather sticking out on her side and the little fellow catching sight of it swam close and tweaked at it so hard that she had to swim out of his reach.

Before starting to feed her brood, the old Grebe, to my amazement and chagrin, deliberately swam out at the lonely little Solitary One with such menace that it dived and disappeared from the neighborhood. How could she have done such a thing? I found myself looking at her with indignant protest. But—she had probably suffered from hungry onlookers before and was simply following Nature's command that the family must be preserved, at whatever cost. It is so easy to judge of one's neighbor quite apart from her relation to the universe.

Mother Holbœll, now having the world to herself, began diving for weed. When she came up wet, she sometimes rose and showed big white patches at the back of her wings, and dried her head by rubbing it on her back. When she brought a streamer of green weed she would shake it before passing it on to the young. On rare occasions, greatly to the astonishment of the waiting three, she would swallow it herself. This was undoubtedly because they did not seem very hungry. After eating a little they laid their heads down on their backs as the Western Grebes do, but in this case the oval front, instead of white, was a pale reddish brown. While their mother was feeding them, another adult whom I surmised was the father of the family, was seen on the outskirts bathing and diving, after which he swam away with a long narrow wake.

When I went on down to the cove I found another Holbœll family there—a parent with two nearly grown young. One of the young turned on his side to preen, showing the white Grebe breast, and then the brothers swam off by themselves, diving independently. When they had gone far enough, however, a loud peremptory *ker'•r-kar'•r-kar'r* recalled them, and as their parent waited, with quick obedience they started to swim back. One stopped a moment for a dive, but then, as if feeling guilty, hurried on with the green weed uneaten in his bill.

Returning along the crest of the wooded bank, at the highest point I could look off over lake and Coulee, and out across the prairie, with the glass

recognizing the pleasantly familiar forms of the house, barn, and windmill of the farm on North Sweetwater where I had spent the early summer. Farther down the shore, near where I had left them, I found my family of three, Little Talkative babbling on as before close beside his mother, while she answered with a single motherly *kruk'* often enough to seem interested in his talk. The little fellow, after again pulling at the tempting white feather, lay down full length on the water putting his foot out so that the lobes showed, as the Western Grebe had done, and made me laugh by shaking it behind him as a dog wags his tail. It seemed to be a favorite pastime. When the young were swimming through the clear water, I could see their lobate paddles steering, turning them to right or left.

Just before I went home, the second adult, whom I had taken for the father, came up in sight with green lake weed dangling from his bill. Catching sight of him, the young started eagerly and swam toward him, but before they could get to him, he dived and swam out of their reach under water. As there was nothing else to do, they turned around and swam back to their faithful mother. This unnatural action on the part of the supposed father troubled me sorely till I reflected that perhaps two such large conspicuous birds feeding a brood might sometimes be a menace, and concluded that many of the apparently unnatural and immoral acts of Cowbirds and their brothers may find their explanation in the working out of the long evolutionary story.

Another day two of the young were talking to Mother Holbœll at the same time, their open bills showing as they followed her around. They were so well fed that their crops bulged, making ruddy apples of them. A good recognition mark these rufous apples made across the water, having the same outline as the white apples of the Western and the young Eared Grebes, but being strikingly rufous. When a young Holbœll was seen near by, its neck was laid on its back, its bill being one side of the rotund ruddy apple.

When the plump trio were idly resting on the water, their mother suddenly swam at one of the larger ones and, as with malice aforethought, gave it a poke with her bill. However her son interpreted this forcible exhortation, he at once began to preen himself, diligently. Then she swam at another of the strong ones, chasing him till he dived, after which she rose and shook her wings triumphantly. Little stuffed apples! It was time they should dive for themselves, not just sit around and be fed all day long. As if to enforce her lesson on independence, Mother Holbœll suddenly started and raced away through the water, leaving the three to take care of themselves. Perhaps there was another side to the question. Possibly the incessant chattering of youngsters gets on the nerves of even such faithful mothers as Grebes! While I was trying to apologize for her surprising behavior—back she swam to her brood!

The next morning my family were found as usual on the smooth water of the cool shaded shore. In my eagerness to see them, I may have pressed too close to my green screen or may have snapped a twig. In any case the mother evidently saw me, for she gave her *cluck* of warning and they swam farther out from shore, one of the youngsters kicking up the water behind him in paddling around. The mother and Little Talkative stayed together and preened while the two larger brothers apparently were out fending for themselves—one was seen diving. The discipline of the previous day was surely bearing fruit! For about a week longer Mother Holbœll and Little Talkative were seen together, the Disciplined Brothers occasionally being seen in their environs.

(To be continued)